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The Use of Booths in the Original Staging of Jonson's Bartholomew Fair

1. Introduction (900 words)

1.1. Known facts of the staging

According to the date of the contract read out in the Induction¹, Jonson's Bartholomew Fair was performed, quite possibly for the first time, at the Hope theatre on 31 October 1614 by the Lady Elizabeth's Men. The following night it was performed by the same company before King James at Whitehall². These two facts are securely known and they are of special interest not only to Jonsonians but also to historians of the theatre because they can be put in conjunction with other evidence we are fortunate to have. We happen to have the contract for the building of the Hope theatre, dated 29 August 1613³, and we have the accounts which detail expenditure on the court performance⁴. This richness of background evidence concerning the practicalities of staging is unique for a play from this period and the material has yet to be exhausted. I hope in this paper to offer some specific uses of this evidence in the light of work done by others on Jonson's artistic intentions in this play.

1.2 Significance of booths

The Revels Accounts include a payment for "Canvas for the Boothers and other neccessaries for a play called Bartholmewe ffaire"⁵. It is easy to imagine what these booths might be: Ursula has a booth in which she roasts pig, and Leatherhead's puppet-theatre needs a booth too. Possibly Leatherhead's shop is substantial enough to call for a booth also, although Joan Trash's seems not to be⁶. But these expenses are for the court performance; what do we know of the previous afternoon's show at the Hope? For this we must look to the contract to build the theatre. Because the Hope was designed to be a dual- purpose arena capable of putting on both plays and animal- baiting shows, some unusual design features were specified. The stage was to be demountable and supported on trestles, and stage and trestles could be packed away when not needed, leaving the pit free for the animals. Because the stage was not fixed there could be no conventional stage-posts resting on it, and hence the contract calls for a stage-cover that supports itself without posts. It is reasonable to suppose that the need to provide a fairly smooth surface upon which an enraged animal could get no purchase meant that the back-wall of the stage was merely the curved inner wall of the playhouse frame and furthermore that it was not elaborately decorated. The statues of classical gods which are believed by the designers of the new Bankside Globe to have adorned its original would not have been suitable for the Hope. This peculiar arrangement means that the Hope was either an unusually dull theatre--it does not sound like one of the 'gorgeous palaces' the Puritans complained of--or else the players found other means to embellish it. One very practical embellishment would have been the use of the stage-booth.

1.3. The fortunes of the stage-booth

The stage-booth has had a very rough time of it at the hands of theatre historians in recent years. From a high-point in the 1950s when Leslie Hotson seriously suggested that the tiring house was under the stage and that all entrances were made via a booth placed over a trap⁷, interest has fallen off sharply. Others, notably Warren D. Smith⁸, C. Walter Hodges⁹, and A. M. Nagler¹⁰, have made more limited claims for the use of a portable structure which is variously called a 'pavilion', a 'mansion', and a 'scaffold' but which I will lump together with Revels Accounts' 'booths'. The essential features are a three-dimensional rectilinear wooden frame large enough for several players to stand within, with curtains suspended from the top which can be drawn aside to completely reveal or conceal the occupants, and perhaps a solid roof strong enough to support a player or two. There are good reasons to believe that such booths made of lath and canvas were a common property in Elizabethan court interludes of the mid-sixteenth century, and E. K. Chambers makes a case for their later use in a fusion of vernacular and imported (continental) staging practices¹¹. Their interest to us, however, must be their use by Jonson in 1614 when, unless much of what we think we know about the staging practices of the public playhouses is mistaken, they would have been distinctly anachronistic.

Importance of the meta-theatrical

There is one very good reason why Jonson might have wanted to use booths, of course. Most of the action of Bartholomew Fair takes place at a fair, and fairs, then as now, consisted largely of temporary booths in which food, drink, and what used to be called 'fancy goods' are sold, and some very peculiar services are offered. It is essential to keep in mind, however, that when Jonson used booths in this way he was doing something quite extraordinary. Rather than employing the convention whereby the booth might be understood to represent a house, or a prison, or a cave, Jonson used the booth to represent a booth. This startling short-circuiting of theatrical convention must have a fundamental influence on our understanding of the way in which the play works. By having a booth represent nothing but a booth Jonson constructs an elaborate commentary on the stage-craft of his time, and we may well consider the booth-as-booth trick as a meta-theatrical device: dramatic practice that comments on dramatic practice. It is this that I wish to explore.

2. Exposition (1900 words)

2.1. Meta-theatrical allusions

2.1.1. Mansion, bower, and state

Like much of the drama of the period, Jonson's play contains many direct references and indirect allusions to the practice of play-making. I want to consider some of these allusions and see if we can make sense of them in relation to Jonson's use of booths. First I wish to consider some of the words used by Jordan Knockem of Ursula's booth. Let us assume, as Eugene Waith does in his Yale edition of the play¹², that Ursula's booth is erected in full view of the audience during Justice Overdo's soliloquy at the start of Act 2. Between this erection and the arrival of Winwife and Quarlous in Act 2 Scene 5 we see a variety of fair-people and we may well surmise their occupations from their dialogue and the fictional setting from the structures on

the stage. But it is not until the first potential customers arrive, in the persons of Winwife and Quarlous, that we hear a direct explanation of one of the stage structures. Knockem says to Quarlous "Will you sit down, sir? This is old Ur'sla's mansion. How like you her bower? Here you may ha' your punk and your pig in state, sir, both piping hot"¹³ 'Mansion', 'bower', and 'state'--how very odd. Quarlous does not use the correct fair-person's term 'booth' but rather he uses three theatrical terms for structures which stage-booths, if we are to believe their supporters, were conventionally used to represent.

Eugene Waith annotates Knockem's use of the word 'mansion' as a possible allusion to stage mansions which he says "were firmly rooted in theatrical tradition" both from the mystery cycles and classical plays acted at court and at the universities¹⁴. Waith, following Herford and Simpson, suggests that 'bower' might indicate that Ursula's booth is covered with boughs¹⁵, but I think this a highly unlikely covering for a fairground booth, especially one in which meat is to be roasted. The bower in which Horatio is hanged in Kyd's Spanish Tragedy was, to judge from the wood-cut which adorned the quarto of 1615, a free-standing structure which adherents of the stage-booth school of staging claim as one of the many uses to which this ubiquitous property was put.

Knockem's use of 'state' ("you may ha' your punk and your pig in state") may be merely adverbial, but I think it also alludes to the chair of state. Warren D. Smith has argued that the stage-booth served a variety of functions including housing the throne, and that the same structure that housed Caesar's state in Shakespeare's play might also be used for the pulpit, and even the 'rock' and 'hill' of the last act¹⁶. Andrew Gurr also envisages some kind of 'dais' or 'scaffold' to house the throne¹⁷, and there is no reason to suppose that this structure might not be stripped of its opulent hangings to be re-used for another purpose even within the same play. Although the word 'state' often meant the chair alone, the OED also records it being used to indicate the canopy over the throne (sb. 20.b) and also the raised chair together with its canopy (sb. 20.a). It is the booth, then, that provides the dais and the canopy that transforms an ordinary chair into a royal throne, and hence the word 'state' attaches to the combined structure of booth plus chair and, by metonymy, to the booth even without the chair. Hence Knockem's scathing comment on Ursula's booth, which is represented by a piece of stage furniture which was more frequently seen fulfilling a royal function.

I suggest that Knockem's use of these words--'mansion', 'bower', and 'state'--is very deliberate. What is shown to the audience is a booth representing a booth, which is unusual in itself. But when this structure is first described it is given the names of all the other things which it might be called upon to represent in other contexts. Most playwrights might be expected to narrow down the range of meanings available to the spectator by having a character say 'Oh, that's a booth', but not Jonson. Not only has he inverted the visual convention by his booth-as-booth trick, but he inverts the dialogue convention too and has the structure be called anything but a booth. And remember, he does this on the first occasion available: when the customers begin to arrive. Thereafter the joke is dropped and Ursula's booth may be called just that.

2.1.2. Labels

Quarulous and Winwife are only potential customers, and they do not patronise Ursula's establishment. The real customers arrive in the persons of John Littlewit's party in Act 3 Scene 2. An authorial stage-direction tells us that "Littlewit is gazing at the sign; which is the pig's head with a large writing under it"¹⁸. This sign advertises Ursula's trade, but it also labels the booth for the audience: the "large writing" is presumably for the audience to read. The puppet-theatre of the final act is also labelled with what Leatherhead calls "the sign of our invention"¹⁹ and which an authorial stage-direction calls a "bill" when Cokes reads it aloud in Act 5 Scene 3²⁰. It has been suggested by William A. Armstrong that the signs are needed because the booth used to represent Ursula's establishment is also used to represent the puppet-theatre, the fixing of the new sign indicating the change-over²¹. This attractive idea is undermined by the Revels Accounts' reference to a plurality of "boothes" (although I suppose that Leatherhead might just have one) and more certainly by Littlewit's cry addressed to the audience of the puppet theatre that he left his wife "at the great woman's house...yonder"²². Even without the re-use of one booth, the labelling of booths would undoubtedly have reminded those members of the audience who had seen one of the performances at court or university of a classical play. Sidney's Defence of Poesie tells us of the use of labels when he asks "What childe is there, that coming to a play, and seeing Thebes written in great letters vpon an old doore, doth beleue that it is Thebes?"²³. Sidney is of course telling us about private performances and again, unless theatre historians are wildly mistaken about public theatre practice, and I'm sure they are not, Jonson's allusive use of labelling is highly anachronistic (and literally indecorous) at the Hope in 1614.

2.1.3. 3.4.11-122 "play...over...bear's skin...masque"

2.1.4. 3.5.118 "before the King's face"

2.1.5. Cokes's patronage

2.1.6. Taylor water-poet

2.2. Reading the meta-theatrical allusions with the Induction

Why does Jonson play with meta-theatrical allusions in this way in Bartholomew Fair? I want to develop some ideas about Jonson's complex and anxious relation to the conditions under which he worked, which, I believe, never ceased to rankle with him. The key which unlocks this is the Induction which, we must remember, was not performed at court where it was replaced by a Prologue.

2.2.1. Framing a play

The Induction has something punningly in common with the puppet-theatre booth: they both frame a play. This sounds trite I know, but I do believe that Jonson saw it in exactly that way. What happens inside this frame is, in each case, a radical inversion of artistic decorum. The puppet-play takes Marlowe's Hero and Leander, and quite possibly Richard Edwards' Damon and Pythias also, and thoroughly vulgarises them. Edward's court play of 1564 is blended with Marlowe's unfinished dramatic poem and the result is bathetically set in contemporary London. And still worse the adaptation is staged with glove-puppets before an audience which includes the most foolish patron of the arts, Bartholomew Cokes, and their most implacable enemy, Zeal-of-the-land

Busy. The problem for the puppeteer is Jonson's problem: how to cope with a less-than-ideal audience.

2.2.2. Polyscenic expectation

The use of stage-booths points back to earlier theatrical practices, and might stimulate an audience to expect the use of 'polyscenic staging' in which the stage is divided into independent zones which represent different geographic locations. The standard objection to such arrangements is voiced by Sidney: "the Stage should alway represent but one place" and not "haue Asia of the one side, and Affricke of the other"²⁴, which is of course a re-statement of the unity of place. Leaving aside the question of whether Aristotle's injunctions were properly understood by Elizabethan playwrights, we have Jonson's expression of the principles of dramatic unity in the Prologue to Every Man In his Humour, and we should be able to test Bartholomew Fair against this. On closer analysis, however, it is very difficult to say whether the unities are preserved in this play.

Take, for instance, unity of time. This might be said to be preserved because the events all occur within the span of one day. But time does not really operate in a linear fashion in the play. There is some fairly standard compression in the encompassing of a day's events, from setting up the stalls in the morning to a mass exeunt to supper, but there is also some peculiar drawing out of time. As Peter Womack has pointed out²⁵, Win Littlewit enters the back of Ursula's booth to go to the toilet at the end of Act 3 Scene 6 and does not emerge from it until the beginning of Act 4 Scene 5, some 550 lines later. And even then the only reason Jonson brings her out seems to be to get some laughs from Mistress' Overdo's need to use the same toilet.

Taking the example of unity of place we came up against a similar paradox of apparent conformity with underlying violation. Apart from the first act set in Littlewit's house--which must end with some scene-shifting unless we accept R. B. Parker's unusual polyscenic staging²⁶--the stage is made to represent a piece of land in Smithfield about the same size as itself and hence unity of place is preserved. And yet within this space people continually lose one another and disorientation is common. The use of stage-booths raises an expectation of old-fashioned polyscenic staging which violates the dramatic unities, but Jonson instead presents an ostensible preservation of them which, on closer examination, is in fact a trick. It must be said that this effect is very dependent on the exact positioning of the booths on the stage, and that getting their relative proximities wrong might destroy it.

2.2.3. The Induction

The Stage-keeper and the Book-holder who begin Bartholomew Fair dramatise a change in the practices of the London public stage. This particular Stage-keeper is a relic from the late sixteenth century who displays in his references to Richard Tarlton and John Adams a knowledge of that period's achievements and bemoans the deficiencies of modern plays and players. The Book-holder who sends the Stage-keeper off represents a new theatrical practice based on a new relationship, materialised in a contract, between producers and consumers. Moreover the Book-keeper and his scrivener represent an authorial literary practice over a collective dramatic practice (the clowns Tarlton and Adams were renowned for their ad lib

comments and departures from the text). The Induction makes play-making a theme of the play itself by making concrete the implicit relationships and the changes in conditions. The fair, a place of licence and excess, is represented on a stage that is, in the view of many contemporary writers, a place of licence and excess. The Scrivener makes the parallel explicit: "The play shall presently begin. And though the Fair be not kept in the same region that some here, perhaps, would have it, yet think that therein the author hath observed a special decorum, the place being as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit"²⁷

3. Conclusion (350 words)

3.1. Old practices and new practices

The contract read out in the Induction reifies the implicit dramatic contract between audience and play-makers. At the same time it (to use a fashionable term in its most literal sense) 're-negotiates' that contract. Jonathan Haynes has argued²⁸ that in the Induction Jonson recasts his audience as a detached, sober, almost Brechtian, and heterogeneous group of spectators who contemplate but do not interfere--just the kind that Leatherhead would no doubt prefer for his puppet-show. This shows a new attitude toward the carnivalesque, Haynes argues, and one that is proto-bourgeois in strong contrast to the fair's residual medieval saturnalia. Haynes is right to suggest that the real Bartholomew Fair was partaking of this transformation, but we can do more than simply register Jonson's capturing of this social change. Jonson was no doubt attracted to the subject matter because it provided an opportunity to comment on the changing status of play-making and play consumption. One of the opportunities he saw in a play about a fair was a way of using stage-booths to comment on the old practices. Considered together with the Induction this makes for a virtual artistic manifesto in which the old ways literally frame a theatrical disaster, the puppet-play which cannot be completed, and the new knowing, self-conscious, and self-possessed ways frame an artistic success. Thus we may say that King James only really saw half of the play at court.

3.2. Coda

In 1616 Jonson stopped writing plays after the failure of his The Devil Is An Ass, and he did not resume until 1625. During this period he devoted himself to writing court masques for which Inigo Jones provided the spectacle. It was a partnership which ended acrimoniously with a semi-public war of words, and it is often said that Jonson finally allowed himself to assert his deeply held conviction of the superiority of the poetic over the visual arts. I hope I have shown here that Jonson had a profoundly developed visual imagination and that he could produce superbly complex visual puns, such as the booth-as-booth trick in Bartholomew Fair.

Notes

¹Ind.60-1. Quotations and line references are all from Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair, ed. by Eugene M. Waith, The Yale Ben Jonson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

²That the performance was on this day is shown by an item in the financial accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber which records payment to Nathan Field on behalf of

the acting company. This item is transcribed in David Cook, and F. P. Wilson, eds, Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber 1558-1642, Malone Society Collections, 6 (Oxford: Malone Society, 1961), p. 60. That the court was at Whitehall is shown by a letter dated 11 September 1614 from the Reverend Thomas Lorkin to Sir Thomas Pickering at Tours (transcribed in Thomas Birch, ed., The Court and Times of James the First, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1848), vol. 1, pp. 345-7) which describes James tearing up parliamentary bills at the Whitehall Banqueting House. The preceding five letters from Lorkin to Pickering make it clear that Lorkin was imparting the latest news and that the incident at Whitehall occurred after James returned from his 'progress' through Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire., and Berkshire during August. There is no evidence of the court removing from Whitehall between 1 September and 1 November. See E. K. Chambers The Elizabethan Stage, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), vol. 4, p. 129.

³Walter W. Greg, ed., Henslowe Papers: Being Documents Supplementary to Henslowe's Diary (London: Bullen, 1907) pp. 19-22 ⁴As well as the payment to the players mentioned in n. 2 above, there is an entry amongst the Revels Accounts for the stage set, cited in n. 5 below. Both are also reproduced in E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, vol. 4, p. 183.

⁵Pipe Office Declared Accounts (P.R.O 351/2805) f. 31a, transcribed in W. R. Streitberger, ed., Jacobean and Caroline Revels Accounts, 1603-1642, Malone Society Collections, 13 (Oxford: Malone Society, 1986), p. 70

⁶3.4.135-142

⁷Leslie Hotson, Shakespeare's Wooden O (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), pp. 119-54 ⁸Warren D. Smith, 'Evidence of Scaffolding on Shakespeare's Stage', The Review of English Studies, n.s., 2 (1951), 22-29

⁹C. Walter Hodges, The Globe Restored: A Study of the Elizabethan Theatre, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 54-63

¹⁰A. M. Nagler, Shakespeare's Stage, Enlarged edn (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 26-65

¹¹E. K. Chambers, The Elizabethan Stage, vol. 3, pp. 1-45

¹²Jonson, Bartholomew Fair, pp. 211

¹³2.5.38-40

¹⁴Jonson, Bartholomew Fair p. 212

¹⁵2.5.39n and 3.2.53

¹⁶Warren D. Smith, 'Evidence of Scaffolding on Shakespeare's Stage', p. 26

¹⁷Andrew Gurr, The Shakespearean Stage 1574 - 1642, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 151-2, 192-3

¹⁸3.2.50-5

¹⁹5.1.1-2

²⁰5.3.6

²¹William A. Armstrong, 'Ben Jonson and Jacobean Stagecraft', in Jacobean Theatre, ed. by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 1, Gen. ed. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, (London: Edward Arnold, 1960), pp. 43-61; p. 54

²²5.6.17

²³Sir Philip Sidney, The Defence of Poesie (London: T. C[reede] for W. Ponsonby, 1595), sig. G1 ²⁴Sir Philip Sidney, The Defence of Poesie, sig. H4

²⁵Peter Womack, Ben Jonson, Rereading Literature (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 150-4

²⁶R. B. Parker, 'The Themes and Staging of Bartholomew Fair', University of Toronto Quarterly, 39 (1970), 293-309

²⁷Ind.138-42

²⁸Jonathan Haynes, 'Festivity and the Dramatic Economy Jonson's Bartholomew Fair', English Literary History, 51 (1984), 645-68; pp. 658-9